

And Take A Son

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After Jeff Corrigan delivered half a dozen Little Leaguers back their parents and turned his car homeward. Five minutes later he parked in front of the modest ranch style house.

He stepped into the late August sun and watched his youngest daughter, Keven, throw a rubber ball against the garage doors.

She frowned in concentration, shook off the sign of an imaginary catcher, and then nodded. Her pitch was low and obviously intended to be fast.

Keven was nine, her dark hair in a pony tail, and she wore faded blue jeans. The slam of the car door brought her back into this world and she turned. "Hello, Daddy. Did you win?"

"I'm afraid not, Keven. 11 to 4."

She sighed. "I suppose Ronnie Evans was pitching." She stared pensively at the garage.

He rumpled her hair slightly. "All Ronnie's got to show is a slow curve and he's never sure where that's going to go."

Jeff found his wife Madge in the kitchen slicing radishes for a salad. "Anything in the mail?" he asked.

"Just the bill for the dresses I bought Josie and Phyllis last week."

He smiled. Girls are expensive to raise. Now if we had boys...."

Jeff tasted a shred of carrot. "I'll take a shower before dinner, Honey."

Madge concentrated on the salad. "The Wtsons had their baby last night. A boy."

"Well, good for Harvey."

She regarded Jeff almost with hostility. "Why? He has three boys already. And he's only five-foot two, and he weighs less than a hundred and thirty pounds, and...."

Jeff smiled. "Honey, that doesn't have anything to do with it."

"I know," she agreed reluctantly. "But it still doesn't seem fair. You were a star athelete and you're six feet tall...."

"It really doesn't matter, darling," Jeff assured her. "I wanted children. Period. I'm perfectly satisfied with three normal healthy girls."

After his shower, Jeff wandered out into the backyard. His neighbor, Harvey Watson, was trimming a rose bush.

"Congratulations," Jeff said.

Harvey got to his feet. "Thanks, I guess." He shook his head glumly. "Boys run around all the time and they drag you out camping and you wind up with a sprained back and poison ivy." He glanced at his watch. "I suppose I'll have to get supper ready for the boys while their mother's gone. If I had girls, they could do it for themselves." He puffed at his pipe and smiled faintly. "Still... in a way... it's nice to have four boys. Makes you sort of feel that you accomplished something."

Jeff was still faintly irritated when he went to the back steps and sat down beside Kevin.

She sighed. "It's hard being a boy. My arm hurts."

Jeff raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to be a boy?"

"Well... Mom and Josie and Phyllis have been talking and I've been listening. Are you lonely because you don't have a boy?"

"Whatever made you think that?"

"well, everybody thinks you must be. But I'm the only one who's doing anything about it. I'm going to get on the Little League team and you'll be proud of me."

Jeff smiled. "Did anybody ever tell you how pretty you look in a dress?"

She burst into a smile. "You always do." She thought of something else. "But I think

you'd like a boy. That's why you coach the Little League team."

Jeff rubbed his jaw. "One day a delegation of fathers visited me, twisted my arm, and the next thing I knew I was managing a baseball team."

"But you *do* like it, don't you?"

Jeff frowned slightly. Did he? He knew he didn't *mind*. That was certain. They were all good boys. Jimmie, Harold, Davy.... They were all individuals with their dreads, their drives, their hopes. If he had a son.... Jeff shook the thought out of his mind. "Keven, honey, I think you'd better go in and wash up. Dinner should be just about ready."

Why do most men have such a desperate desire to have a son? Jeff wondered after Keven disappeared inside the house. Well, at least I don't feel that way, he told himself firmly.

He saw Josie, eleven, and Phyllis, thirteen, walking up the alley, talking earnestly.

They opened the back gate, saw their father, and instantly became silent.

Aha, Jeff thought. Something's up.

Phyllis finally said, "hello, Daddy," and Jose echoed that.

"Hello, girls," and Jeff waited.

They glanced at each other and sidled past him and entered the house.

Well, Jeff reflected. Probably nothing serious, but they always think it is.

He listened contentedly to the late afternoon neighborhood sounds and his thoughts went back to Ronnie Evans. The boy had his heart set on pitching, but he just wasn't good enough. But how am I going to tell him that? Jeff wondered sadly. Maybe the boy's father should break the news to him. "Ronnie, you know there are a lot of things in this world that we'd like to do — a lot of things that we'd like to be. But, Ronnie, we've got to learn that sometimes we will have to face disappointment. And we've got to take those disappointments like men." Yes, Jeff thought,

that's the way I'd do it if I had a son.

He lit a cigarette, glanced at his watch and found that it was a half-hour past the usual dinner time.

He tilted his head a moment and listened. Yes, there was a definite sibilance of voices coming from the kitchen. He got to his feet and went inside the house.

Madge and the three girls were seated around the kitchen table. The whispering stopped immediately. Their flushed faces revealed a mixture of guilt and suppressed excitement.

"Is it anything you can tell me?" Jeff asked dryly.

"My goodness," Marge said with swift cheerfulness. "Dinner is way, way late. We'll get right at it."

After dinner Madge and the girls followed him to the living room. Madge got a magazine from the rack and sat down. Josie, Phyllis, and Keven found magazines for themselves too, and paged through them with utter casualness.

Jeff picked up the evening newspaper, glanced at the front page, and waited.

"Dear," Madge finally said.

"Yes?"

For a moment she seemed flustered. Her eyes went to the girls for support and each of them nodded solemnly.

"Dear," Madge said, evidently gathering together all her courage, "I might as well come to the point. Have you ever thought about adopting a boy?"

Jeff was startled. "*Adopting a boy?*"

Madge shifted the emphasis. "*Adopting a boy.*"

Jeff hadn't and he didn't see that he had to now. "Of course not."

"Daddy," Phyllis said. "A man must sing a song, plant a tree, and have a son, or something like that."

"You *do* want a son, don't you, Daddy?" Keven asked. "You could be happy and I could go back to wearing dresses."

"I'm absolutely happy with things as they stand now."

"I think it's a swell idea," Josie said enthusiastically. "We *need* a brother and you *need* a son."

"At least *think* about it," Madge urged.

Why do women always talk in italics, Jeff wondered peevishly. "I've already thought about it. No. That's *final*."

He put down the paper. "I'm going to the drugstore for some tobacco or something."

Dusk was merging into evening when he stepped outside. He passed two boys lazily tossing a ball back and forth on the sidewalk.

Other boys sat on their front steps mumbling tired boy-talk and waiting for the inevitable moment when they would be ordered back into the house to get ready for bed.

Where were all the girls? Jeff wondered irritably. Sitting home and having tea parties?

At the drugstore he ordered a coke.

A heavy-jowled man sat at one end of the counter reading a folded newspaper. Beside him ten-year-old boy plowed methodically through a large banana split. When the boy finished, he looked up at the man. "Could I have a chocolate sundae now?"

The man shifted the stub of the cigar slightly in his mouth and glanced briefly at the soda fountain clerk. "Give him what he wants."

Jeff studied the boy. Too much weight. But still the boy had prospects. Good bone structure, nice shoulders, and he looked intelligent.

When the boy finished the chocolate sundae he stared glassy-eyed at the empty dish.

Well, he's full, Jeff thought. Absolutely full.

The boy turned to his preoccupied father and sighed wearily. "I guess I might as well have another chocolate sundae."

"No," Jeff said firmly.

The boy and his father stared at him and

their mouths dropped.

Jeff felt color rising to his face. He was on the verge of apologizing, but then he stiffened. "No more ice cream," he said. "You've eaten too much already."

The man flushed with anger.

Jeff found himself glaring too. All right, speak up, he thought fiercely. I might have something to say too about a father who's too busty to watch what his son is doing.

The man's color deepened, but he broke his eyes from Jeff's. "Come on, kid," he muttered. "Let's get out of here."

At the door the boy looked back. His face was perplexed, but not angry. He seemed to find it strange that someone was interested enough in him to tell him to stop eating so much. "Goodbye, Mr. Corrigan."

Jeff watched them walk down the street. I don't ever remember seeing the boy, but he knew my name. I wonder how many boys in the neighborhood recognize *his* father.

Jeff bought some pipe tobacco and went back home.

Later, after he and Madge had gone to bed, Jeff lay in the darkness with his eyes open. "Goodbye, Mr. Corrigan." The boy definitely had too much weight on him. Every time he wanted attention, his parents probably gave him candy and ice cream and thought that was enough. The boy was undoubtedly loaded with toys, too. "Here's a brand new camera, kid. Real expensive. Now go outside and don't bother me." And "Look, kid, a swell bike. Now ride it someplace and don't come back until suppertime."

Madge stirred slightly. She's awake too, he thought.

Did she really want a baby boy? For his sake?

Were baby boys much harder to raise than girls? He supposed they cried a lot too. How long did it take them to smile? And how long did you call them the "toothless wonders?" Jeff could imagine the way the boy would sit in his playpen and grin.

Suppose the boy wasn't a baby? Suppose he were five or six? A problem child? An unwanted boy? Withdrawn. In a sad world of his own. How would Jeff handle a situation like that? Plenty of loving, of course. Give the boy a feeling of permanence... security....

He sat up and got out of bed. He felt his way to the living room and turned on a lamp.

After a few minutes he became conscious of Madge standing in the doorway, watching him. He grinned ruefully. "Just who do we see in order to get our boy?"

The next morning they phoned their doctor and got his recommendation of an authorized and licensed adoption agency.

But it was another long, dragging twenty-four hours before they found themselves in the office of a Miss Thelma Wilson.

Miss Wilson was gray-haired, but her face was firm and her eyes seemed to be composed of icy blue steel.

"We've come to adopt a baby," Jeff announced. "A baby boy."

Miss Wilson took their names then reached for some printed forms. "Fill these out, please."

"How long will it take?" Madge asked. "To get the baby, I mean."

"The waiting period can extend from six to eighteen months," Miss Wilson said dryly. "Usually it's about a year. Why are people always so surprised about the amount of time a thing like this takes?"

Is she always like this on Monday? Jeff wondered. Maybe we should come back tomorrow. Or get somebody else. Somebody more sympathetic.

Miss Wilson apparently read his mind. "If you *really* want a baby, you'll have to overcome a number of obstacles and I am one of them. Contrary to what so many people choose to believe, babies are a scarce commodity. For every available baby, there are ten couples who want him. I eventually have to say 'No,' to nine of them. And so I hate my job — nine times out of ten."

Jeff wasn't convinced. "Then why are orphan asylums so full of...?"

"I was speaking about *babies*," Miss Wilson said. She gazed past them and a shadow seemed to cross her face. "People are interested in children until they are five or six. But when we get them older than that, it seems that nobody wants them."

Jeff and Madge went to work on the printed form. He frowned after a few moments. "You certainly want to know everything."

Miss Wilson nodded. "Everything."

When Jeff and Madge finally signed their names, Miss Wilson glanced at the papers. "There will be other forms to fill out later. And we will conduct an investigation, interviewing both of you separately a number of times. You may also expect visits from me and other staff members in the coming months. We must know whether the baby is right for you and you are right for the baby."

Madge flushed angrily. "We're raising three daughters who are perfectly happy and adjusted."

"Mrs. Corrigan, it might appear that we pry and snoop. But this is necessary. I have been in this office for thirty-five years and my interest in you is strictly professional."

And so cold, Jeff thought.

For five weeks absolutely nothing happened — as far as Madge or Jeff were aware.

And then there came the day when Jeff returned from his law office and found Madge sitting disconsolately on the divan, clutching a handkerchief.

His face clouded with worry. "What's wrong, honey?"

Madge stared straight ahead. "Miss Wilson was here."

Jeff felt suddenly cold. "What did she...? Did she say anything about the adoption?"

"No. She just sat there and talked about the weather and things like that and she pried... and snooped... with her eyes." Madge

worked on the handkerchief again. "Why did she have to come on a *Friday*? And without giving me warning? The house is a perfect mess. *Everybody* knows I do my housecleaning on Saturdays. She'll think we live in a pigsty and we're not worthy parents."

Jeff looked about the room. Everything seemed quite clean to him.

There were other surprise visits during the next several months. Jeff and Madge were interviewed a number of times, together and alone. The case workers even had private talks with each of the three girls.

Fall gave way to winter and the B-days they hopefully set came and went. Their spirits alternately rose and fell and rose again.

It was three weeks later when Jeff saw Miss Wilson again, and she came to his office.

She sat down and stared out of the window for a few moments, absently turning the purse in her lap. Then she spoke. "Mr. Corrigan, you are aware that we've allowed your wife to visit our adoption center nursery?"

Jeff nodded. "Yes."

"We encourage that at this stage. We want to see how the potential mother reacts to babies, even though it is unlikely that any of the ones she handles will ultimately be hers." Miss Wilson seemed perplexed. "Really, babies are pretty much alike. I've seen hundreds and hundreds of them. But every once in a long long while I see a woman pick up a baby and that baby is *hers*."

What is she leading up to? Jeff wondered uneasily.

"Mr. Corrigan," Miss Wilson said. "It looked just like any other baby to me. But then your wife picked it up and there was this sudden surprised look on her face — that shock. This baby she was holding *belonged* to her. If she held fifty-thousand other babies, she would never feel the same."

Jeff broke into a slow smile. "You mean that we've finally got one?"

Miss Wilson's eyes flickered. "Yes. If you want it." Then she sighed and met Jeff's eyes. "Your wife held the baby and it was hers. And then I had to tell her that it was a girl."

Jeff's smile slowly disappeared. "We're waiting for a boy."

"Yes, I know. And you can get one. In a week, two weeks. We were just waiting for the right boy to come along."

Jeff felt relieved, and then faintly apprehensive. "What did my wife say?"

"Nothing," Mr. Corrigan. Absolutely nothing. She just looked at the baby once again and her face turned white. Then she put it down — gently, very gently — and left the room."

"We'll get another baby," Jeff said harshly. "A boy. We'll want him too."

"Yes," Miss Wilson said. She seemed tired. "Of course."

Jeff stared at her angrily. "But it won't be *her* baby? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

Miss Wilson closed her eyes for a moment. "I don't know whether I should have come here and told you this or not. She wanted that baby more than anything else in the world. But she was willing to give it up. Because she thought that you...." Miss Wilson waved a hand helplessly.

Jeff jumped up. "I'd like to see this baby," he said grimly. "This girl. This one in fifty thousand."

Thirty-five minutes later he stared down at the small bundle Miss Wilson handed him. Tiny blue eyes stared back at him and the baby frowned slightly. You don't know what to make of me either, is that it? Jeff wondered tiredly.

He became aware that Miss Wilson was watching him anxiously. She's probably holding her breath, Jeff thought irritably.

He studied the baby. Here was no tingle, no electric shock when he held her. Could I learn to love you?

Yes, Jeff thought wearily. I could love you. Just as much as any of my other girls.

He managed a smile when he looked at Miss Wilson. "No wonder she made such an impression on Marge. She's the most beautiful girl I've seen since Keven was born. But you'd better let me handle this with Madge. We'll never get this baby adopted if she thinks I'm... unhappy... about it. She's somehow got the notion that I'm set on having a boy. Actually it doesn't make any difference to me one way or another."

Did she believe him? He could see that she wanted to.

Jeff went on with aggressive cheerfulness. "We won't tell Madge that you came to see me, Miss Wilson. I'll tell her that I just happened to drop in here for a visit and saw this girl and...." He glanced at the baby's wrist tag. Number 216. Did that mean she was the 216th baby this year? How many of them had been boys? "...and I suddenly wondered why did we have to adopt a boy? After all, we sort of specialize in girls."

Miss Wilson smiled. A soft smile, Jeff saw with surprise, and a lonely thought came to him. She's given away hundreds of babies and she has none of her own. Does anyone ever invite her home to see how the children are doing? We will, Jeff promised himself. We will.

When Jeff left the building he took the first bus home but got off four blocks before his regular stop. Walking the rest of the way home would give him time to think about just how he'd talk to Madge.

He passed a father escorting two small boys of about six who were dressed alike. Twins. Two boys. Some people had all the....

"Hello, Mr. Corrigan."

Jeff stopped and looked down.

The boy from the drugstore. He was sitting on the concrete steps leading to a bungalow. The boy with too much weight.

"Hello," Jeff said, and then added

automatically, "How's your father?"

"Fine," the boy said. "But he's my uncle."

What was the boy's name? Jeff wondered.

"It just doesn't work, though," the boy said gloomily.

"What doesn't work?"

"With my uncle and aunt. They try and it just doesn't work. They're kind of busy all the time." The boy sighed. "I've been with Uncle Tim and Aunt Edna for almost a year."

The boy has gray eyes, Jeff thought. Just like mine.

"But Uncle Tim's getting tired and Aunt Edna gets headaches. But I don't mind going back to St. Anthony's. The kids there are all in the same boat."

St. Anthony's? Yes, Jeff knew of the place. He found himself studying the boy. He's about eleven now and nobody wants him.

The boy stared at the sidewalk. "St Anthony's isn't so bad. Everybody there tries hard to be nice. I'll be going back there at the end of this month."

Jeff kept his eyes on the boy. Did Madge feel this way when she held the baby girl? He was suddenly glad that nobody else wanted this boy. This particular boy.

He found himself smiling. "I've got four women in my house and there's soon going to be one more. Do you think you could stand that many?"

The boy didn't understand. But Jeff was smiling and so he smiled too.

"I'd like to introduce you to all of them," Jeff said, "But first I'd like a talk with your uncle."

The boy was still perplexed, but something came into his eyes. Somehow things were going to be better now. A lot better.

They walked toward the house and Jeff felt the boy's hand slip into his. ♦